

Sharon's War Drive Fueled by Bush Team

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

Since the beginning of the renewed *Intifada* in the Middle East, sparked on Sept. 28, 2000, by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's provocative intrusion onto the Muslim holy site of Al Haram al Sharif, in East Jerusalem, it has been reiterated by political figures in the region, that only a forceful intervention by the United States could stop Israeli aggression against the Palestinians, and reestablish the basis on which peace negotiations might begin again. This has been the plea issued by the Palestinians, as well as by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Jordanian King Abdallah II, authors of a new peace initiative.

Not only has the hoped-for U.S. intervention not come, but the Bush Administration has redoubled its efforts to support Sharon in his war thrust, and to denounce Palestinian Authority (PA) Chairman Yasser Arafat as the cause of the problem. On May 18, the Israeli confrontationist course moved into high gear, with the deployment of F-16 fighter bombers against Palestinian sites, in retaliation for a Palestinian suicide bomber, who killed six in Netanya earlier that day. The deployment of the F-16s signalled military escalation, and a new phase in Israel's military-political strategy.

As the Israeli press has documented, the name of the game is the "final elimination" of the Palestinian problem. The F-16 deployment was highly symbolic, as it was the first time since 1967, that Israel had used them against Palestinians. But in 1967, it was war. Just days later, on May 20, Israeli Armed Forces bombed the home of Jibril Rajoub, the head of the Palestinian preventive security apparatus in the West Bank, a well-known moderate. As Israeli Lt. Col. Erez Weiner admitted in a radio interview on May 22, the attack was deliberate.

Sharon's strategy is straightforward: to escalate military aggression against the PA, killing as many of its leading figures—including Arafat—as possible. By decapitating the PA, and destroying its institutions (the police stations, the security apparatus known as Force 17, and administrative offices), Sharon hopes to throw its remaining leadership into chaos, whereby each would retrench to local positions. According to one scenario, reported on Israeli radio, Rajoub would control the West Bank, Mohammed Dahlan (who was wounded when his house in Ramallah was targeted two months ago) would control Gaza, and so forth. These Palestinian leaders, continually under fire, could also go into exile in Tunisia, or elsewhere, as was the case in the 1980s.

On May 22, Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* commentator Ekiva Eldar asserted that Sharon and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres are already preparing for the "post-Palestinian Authority era." To prepare the ground for the elimination of the PA, the Sharon-Peres government has started to define the PA as "the enemy." Peres has been "reciting Sharon's chorus that 'Arafat encourages terrorism.'" Furthermore, Eldar reports that Sharon "has started nurturing old established families and local leaders in the [occupied] territories, preparing them for the day when his self-fulfilling prophecy that the PA will collapse, comes true—with the generous help of Sharon," the Defense Minister, and the chief of staff. Eldar concludes: "There is evidence, say sources in the territories, that Sharon wants to carve up the territories into areas of influence, the way he did as a general in Gaza in the 1970s."

The next step, would be to broaden the war to the region. Again, it is from the pages of the Israeli press, that confirmation of this strategy comes. A senior Israeli military commentator, writing in *Ha'aretz* the same day, said that the only rationale for the use of F-16s against the Palestinians is that Sharon and the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) are looking to start a wider war beyond the occupied territories. Reuven Pedatzur, a former military pilot, wrote that the use of jet-fighter aircraft "is a quantum leap and it is thus not surprising that Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who himself is a pilot and who is a former commander of the Egyptian Air Force, has warned that the use of fighter jets against Palestinian targets could push the entire Middle East beyond the point of no return." He explained: "When an F-16 carries out a bombing mission in the heart of Gaza City or Ramallah, this is a military action that significantly increases the probability of an all-out regional war breaking out. Another bombing raid, another two bombing raids, and the the inevitable will occur. A bomb will miss the structure that has been designated as a target and will hit an apartment building. Then, in the wake of the death of dozens of innocent Palestinians, the Arab leaders will have no choice but to retaliate. In that scenario, the descent of the entire region into war would be just around the corner." He added that either the IDF is incompetent, or "else the top brass of the IDF are trying to bring about a military escalation that will extend into other areas beyond the territories. . . . Those who authorized the launching of fighter jets into the skies over Nablus should not be surprised if they will be forced to launch them in the near future against targets beyond Israel's international borders as well."

The targets of an external attack have been identified as such by the Israelis themselves: Syria and Iran, on grounds they are supporting the Hezbollah guerrillas in southern Lebanon, and Iraq, the eternal enemy figure.

Enter Colin Powell

Days later, in New York, the Mitchell Commission, chaired by former U.S. Sen. George Mitchell, which had investigated the causes of the renewed violence, officially pre-

sented its report in New York. The report, which had been endorsed by the PA, Jordan, Egypt, Russia, and the European Union, lays out the steps whereby the violence can be ended, and talks restarted. It puts special emphasis on the Israeli settlements as the main obstacle to peace, and reiterates the need to stop all settlement expansion, a matter already contained in the 1993 Oslo Accords.

It was hoped that the commission's findings would force the Bush Administration to take a stand in favor of the report. Although Bush paid lip service to the report, and the press hailed this as a sign of a new U.S. initiative, the statement by Secretary of State Colin Powell makes clear that Washington is fully backing Sharon.

Powell welcomed the Mitchell Commission report on May 21 with several crucial specifications: While calling "on both sides" to cease violence, Powell added, "In this context, we note the report's reference to the need for the Palestinians to make an all-out effort to enforce a complete cessation of violence." Then, while saying that addressing the settlements issue was "an essential confidence-building measure," Powell added, "It [a settlement freeze] is not linked to ending the violence." When pressed on whether the United States would exert pressure on the issue, after a cease-fire, he said he could not answer because that was "hypothetical." In response to demands for U.S. action, Powell indicated that the U.S. Ambassador to Jordan would serve as special assistant for the process, and would "make himself available to the parties." Powell specified that the United States was "not convening a meeting," as requested by the Palestinians and others. Furthermore, "shuttle diplomacy is not what we need right now."

Powell's words were music to Sharon's ears. As *Ha'aretz* reported on May 22, "There were celebrations in the Prime Minister's office when they saw Powell on TV. . . . He conceded to Ariel Sharon's demand not to hold negotiations under fire . . . [and] another treat for Sharon came when Powell announced that there was 'no link' between a cease-fire and a freeze of settlement activity." Powell also made clear that he had no intention of meeting with Arafat.

Thus, the celebrations in Sharon's office. "Much water will pass under the bridge until any serious discussion on halting settlement activity takes place and the Americans have accepted most of Israel's demands," *Ha'aretz* concluded.

The line put out by Powell on the PA is nothing new. Indeed, as recent revelations regarding talks on March 29 between the German and U.S. government have shown, Powell identified Arafat as the guilty party in the conflict. As the German magazine *Der Spiegel* reported, at the meeting were Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, President Bush, Powell, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, Schröder adviser Michael Steiner and German Ambassador to Washington Jürgen Chrobog. On the Middle East, according to the leaked report: "President Bush referred to a recently conducted telephone conversation with Sharon, who wanted to answer ter-

rorism militarily. Arafat [he said] cannot be moved to become more reasonable. Secretary of State Powell informed the group for his part, about a telephone conversation of today with Arafat.

"He [Arafat] had completely lost contact with reality ('The guy is lost'). He places the blame on everyone else, but not on himself. [He says that] Israel, Iran, the U.S.A. are all responsible for the current situation. He is always asking about the American ideas about how the peace negotiations can be taken up again, and referred to the Arab Summit, which allegedly had spoken out for the continuation of the peace process.'

"Powell portrayed this reference as completely misguided. The language of this summit had been completely inappropriate ('outrageous'). He had given Arafat clearly to understand that there would be no American efforts. First of all an end to the violence is needed. But it is apparently impossible to make this understandable to Arafat. . . .

"President Bush stressed the American commitment to Israel, which America would stand by in the future as well."

The War Continues

With this kind of unequivocal backing from Washington, Sharon has felt no need to budge. Following Powell's statements on the Mitchell Commission report, Sharon went on Israeli national television, to announce a cease-fire offer, of a special kind. "I call tonight for a total truce in the area," he said, "and I say again here that if the Palestinians accept this proposal to stop the fire, we will immediately stop the fire." He specified what he meant by a cease-fire: "Not a 100% effort, but a 100% cessation." Asked if he included stone-throwing, he answered, "A rock is also a weapon."

Sharon said that the PA is acting like a terrorist organization, and that Israel "must relate to it as a terror group" until it desists. This means continuing the "preventive assassination" policy against PA leaders, and the progressive elimination of the PA. Sharon also indicated his support for a bill in the U.S. Congress, to consider the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) a terrorist organization. Then, echoing Powell's views, Sharon said, "There is no link between the halt of violence and the subject of the settlements," i.e., that Israel will not agree to a settlements freeze.

Although Israeli Defense Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer followed up on Sharon's "cease-fire" proposal, with the announcement that he had ordered the Army to stop all firing except "when life is in danger," there was no let-up in the violence. On May 23, the Israeli Army conducted five raids, with tanks, into the PA-controlled area in the Gaza Strip. Shells were fired on several sites, including the Yebna refugee camp near the Egyptian border. At the same time, Israeli jets flew over the Lebanese capital Beirut, in a warning mission and on May 24, shot down a civilian plane coming from Lebanon.